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### Out of Hours

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## **The GP Waiting Room Under Examination**

Waiting comes with the territory when seeking and receiving medical attention and the GP surgery waiting room is a place where the most frequent medical attention is awaited. Yet GP waiting rooms and the public's experience of, and in them, is a neglected topic.

The little we know indicates that whilst members of the public may arrive anxious, time in a waiting room can calm nerves and ready someone for a productive conversation about their health. Or increase anxiety. This brief article reports on a unique inquiry into GP surgery waiting rooms in the UK.

The impetus for our study came about via informal conversations between a senior health promotion specialist and a social worker lecturer in Edinburgh in which a mutual interest was found in the 'look' of waiting rooms and foyers where people waited for services, and the impressions that were formed by and in these spaces.

We engaged the help of a professional photographer, the support of surgery managers (who allowed us to photograph during lunch hours and after closing, so as not to inconvenience the public) and studied twenty surgery waiting rooms. We found much good practice but here we concentrate on opportunities for quick wins and food for thought.

Some waiting rooms gave off an air of calm, affording access to light and nature and had a personal touch lent by, for example, local artwork or up-to-date community news. What we have termed the 'unloved' waiting rooms were characterised by:

- Receptions obscured by PC monitors
- The sight of banks of files at the back of Reception
- Rolling tv news with the sound off, or muzak of the 'all-hits' radio type
- leaflet clutter, we counted 224 leaflets, posters and cards in one surgery
- piles of tatty, out-of-date magazines
- lists of dos and don'ts on the walls that lent an unwelcome tone (do we still need 'no smoking' signs?)
- a preponderance of leaflets and posters that, research tells us, can heighten anxiety either by using gruesome imagery (blackened lungs) or may propagate stress ('worried' was a frequently occurring word as in the 'are you worried about...?' type of publicity).

The key belief that we formed was that the waiting room is much more than a transit zone between home, the outside world and the GP. We believe that the waiting room environment needs thought about from a variety of psychological, philosophical, spiritual and architectural angles to reduce the possibility of feelings of loss of control, promote calm and readiness to engage in health matters. Our study report contains a number of practical suggestions including attention to the 'unloved' characteristics we refer to above and:

- in recognition of its vital part in the help-seeking and help-receiving process, having someone with this understanding of, and responsibility for, the waiting area
- giving thought to greater attention and care on arrival in the form of greeting and assurance
- curating and deploying the mass of illness and health-related information that can be made available, for instance instead of piles of leaflets covering every subject under the sun, one surgery had chosen to operate a specific theme per month approach to leaflets e.g. only mental health information one month, the next being about flu or related to some other seasonally appropriate or

national campaign. Another surgery had done away with hard copy altogether and instead was using a monitor to display various health-related news and information.

GPs and other staff in surgeries and health centres will be very much aware that a common sight in today's waiting room is that of many people on their various social media platforms. Some of this is an inevitable feature of contemporary life, yet our literature review and research indicates that the wait can be bettered. And with this, a better health outcome.

Fuller details of our study are available from: Gary Clapton, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, 0131 650 3903 or [gary.clapton@ed.ac.uk](mailto:gary.clapton@ed.ac.uk)

Accompanying five JPEG images:

Obscured Receptions

Rolling TV news

Leaflet clutter

Tatty magazines

'Worry'